'Can You Not?': Non-Performance in New Music

Introduction

Evocative as it is, 'non-performance' within the contemporary contexts of classical music remains undefined. It is attached in turn to the informal performances of Romantic symphonies, or the imaginative realisations of conceptual works, and is often conflated with private performances, participatory works, observation-as-performance, and incomplete performances or works for non-humans. 'Can You Not?' will argue that non-performance is the manipulation of form, rather than content, and will chart the roles of performer and audience in musical works which reject the necessity for either one or the other.

Specifically, the case studies presented in this paper have been selected to celebrate the contradictions, amalgamations, and abstractions offered to musicians who deliberately obstruct their own performativity, in order to illustrate that the negation of conventional performance practice, rather than an aggressive or dismissive gesture, can be a revolutionary motioning towards a world which need not be as it seems. As such, the pieces examined in this text are far from canonic, instead offering examples which shine a light onto what is *not happening* in contemporary music, rather than what we already know to exist. To reinforce this, works have been selected from composers who were under the age of 25 when their pieces were completed, and it is also the case that these pieces were all written between the beginning of 2018 and the end of 2019.

Audience Participation

Zidane Larson is a musician and performance artist, currently based in Manchester. For the past year, they have been performing an unnamed work based on audience interventions across high streets throughout the North of England. Specifically, since the 3rd of June, 2018, Zidane has spent daylight hours on Saturdays seated on the ground, with a toy piano sat in front of him, and an upturned flat-cap set in front of the toy piano. Their location throughout the city is determined by chance, though the apparatus Zidane uses to pick locations is such that it generally selects pedestrian areas with high foot-fall, as it relies on the data generated by thefts from retail premises. Once situated, Zidane waits patiently for a passing member of the public to drop a coin into their hat, at which point Zidane plays a clanking rendition of 'Amazing Grace' on the toy piano. As Zidane writes:

'When I moved to Manchester, I was struck by the number of homeless people throughout the city. Part of me wanted to help, and the public donations I take are passed onto a local charity. But part of me wanted to understand too, and the piece is primarily an

articulation of the conflicts attached to empathetic gestures in art.

Between criticisms of delegated performance, the problematisation of social hierarchies or implied structures of power in community-arts, and accusations of appropriation or unacknowledged privilege, you reach the point where every artistic response you come up with can be negated by a philosophy of ethics. It often feels as though this hyper-intellectualisation of morality ultimately results in inaction, and this piece is a reflection of these tendencies; this work is dependent on validation from members of the public, so it is often the case that I will spend a whole day sitting silently on the streets of Manchester, being no use to anyone.

While elements of Zidane's work could be argued to negate late-capitalism, religion, identity-politics, and a whole array of symbols and structures, it is poetic that ultimately the unnamed work is perhaps best read as a generalised critique of criticism itself.

Performance for Non-Humans

Aaron Moorehouse is a British-Asian artist from Leeds. He studied composition with Roger Marsh and Andy Ingamells, and his first orchestral work (titled *Symphony Number None*) is a work for the private rehearsals of a symphony orchestra. Each of the score's instrumental parts is full of complex staff notation made up of precise rhythms and prescribed pitches, all marked with dynamics ranging from '*ppp*' to '*ppppppp*'. Meanwhile, although the piece is conducted, the conductor works from a separate sheet of text-based instructions, as a full score for the work does not exist. In this respect, the material sounds of the piece are similarly elusive, as all performers must wear foam ear defenders whenever material is either performed or rehearsed (though knowing for certain when one action or the other is happening is made deliberately ambiguous). The justification for this absence of sound is articulated with a handwritten-inscription which hangs over each of the scores - a quotation from La Monte Young arguing that 'it didn't seem to me at all necessary that anyone or anything should have to hear sounds and that it is enough that they exist for themselves'. Aaron explains that:

'The piece is similar to a lot of my works, in that it tries to be lots of things in order to illustrate the subjectivity of complexity, the illusionary and exclusionary nature of harmony, and the meaninglessness of meaning. Commentaries to my pieces work in similar ways, and I often retrospectively attach a slew of associations to completed works in order to show that nothing means anything anyway. I do this to prove a point that new-music composition courses aren't about learning to arrange material, they're about learning to *justify* the arrangement of material, so I find it interesting to play with which compositional devices and aesthetics can be invoked in order to escape (or invite) the necessity for justification

in academia. Similarly, if aesthetic consistency and self-awareness are the only barometers of success, then I use my work to explore where the frame for this consistency ends. Can constant inconstancy be successful? I'm just another clichéd postmodernist, really.

As such, *Symphony Number None* is alternately making the point that I think new orchestral works are needless, that humans are selfish, and that despite all this I still want to write an orchestral work because I am vain. It also asks questions about sustainability and material waste, gate-keeping, and the codification of noise, as well as the wider audiences of sound - as the quiet orchestral material is used to exaggerate the presence of pitches which fall outside the range of human perception. The piece also questions the assumptions of absolute music, as ultimately it strips away sound to reveal a musical experience which is introspective, affirmatory, and satisfying for the orchestral players. The piece similarly investigates concepts surrounding mediation, authorship and authenticity, Western art practices in general, and lemons, and Lemmings, and maybe it will mean some different things tomorrow if I need it to, too.'

Incomplete Performance

Kia Clark is a composer from Sheffield. She studied a BA in Music and has gone on to compose for the now-defunct medium of Vine, even though the platform she utilises has been shut down. Vine was a video-sharing social media network, where users would upload short snippets of original video (vines) that were capped by the platform at a duration of seven seconds. The application became hugely popular, especially with teenagers, though a frequent criticism of the content format was that it was indicative of the reduced attention-span of millennials, with the implication being that this corresponded with a lack of motivation in Generation Z. *Kia argues against this interpretation, explaining that:*

'I found these presumptions to be close-minded and needlessly disparaging. Rather than promoting carelessness and laziness in its users and creators, I believe Vine encouraged hyper-analytical thought processes whereby tone, content, narrative, and harmony all had to be evaluated, deduced and composed in just 7 seconds. Vine is the illustration of a modernised efficiency and awareness of material, and anyway, people seem to be fine with Haikus.

I've chosen to continue to compose occasional works which are exclusively for Vine - I've manipulated archived versions of the application in order to send the vines I create on a journey towards their own cyber-disintegration. I find it cathartic, especially as a young composer whose audible works are rarely performed, as it reminds me of the enjoyment I get from composing, and the autonomy I can still afford to that pursuit. Lately, I've been recording one second of audio for each day of the week, and every Sunday I'll mesh these snippets together, and post the package off on its way into

cyberspace, without listening to the sounds myself. I like to imagine these little musical collages existing as bubbles somewhere in another world - bubbles which have yet to be popped by the provocation of perception or the necessity for affirmation.'

Kia acknowledges that her vine compositions draw somewhat on Jennifer Walshe's *THMOTES* project - text-scores disseminated through the Snapchat application, while Kia's pieces also extend the eulogisation of discarded media forms into the 21st century. However, whereas the gradual irrelevance imposed upon analogue media mediums has been a process its disciples have been able to delay, the death of Vine illustrates the brutality of internet-media executions - with millions upon millions of experiences and communications deleted (to all intents and purposes) as a single switch sends a server into its slumbering disservice.

Participatory Works

James McIlwrath is a composer and performer from Bangor. He completed an undergraduate degree in Music at the University of York, and is currently studying an MA in Experimental Performance at The Royal Birmingham Conservatoire. His text-score titled *'There are at least 20000 buses'* consists of the following two phrases:

> Bring an assortment of musical instruments to a bus stop
> Start a band

'I remember watching an episode of *Antiques Roadshow* before I wrote this piece. The programme features members of the public, who bring along family heirlooms, trinkets, and other memorabilia to stately homes across rural England. The objects are then examined and evaluated by a selection of kindly experts of various antiquities.
It's a fairly benign show, with the familiar glaze of late-afternoon BBC2 charm seeping softly through it.
Anyway, during this episode, an elderly gentleman bumbled along with a very old map of London, which his own great-grandfather had purchased on the occasion of his first trip to the capital more than 200 years ago. The gentleman seemed a little nervous about appearing on television, and as he showed the map to the cartographer, the expert asked a few questions to ease the tension. He asked whether the gentleman had brought anyone along with him to the show, and the old man's eyes lit up as he said his wife of 65 years was here. The camera panned to the lady in question, and she went on to tell a very matter-of-fact story about how the pair of them had 'just started chatting at a bus stop and things went from there really'.
I decided to write a text-score to capture this imagined-nostalgia for a time before my time, when people might have once spoken to one another.'

While the first half of the score is a nod towards the Antiques Roadshow format, and the imagined or elusive histories of certain musical instruments (James himself plays viola), the second instruction-phrase deals more explicitly with ideas of community: taken together, the two contrasting phrase-lengths visualise the physical journey to the bus stop. However, a contradiction persists. And after the performer, dawdling, drags the cumbersome objects to their destination, they stand confused as to how to interpret the piece's participatory instruction. This deciphering is by far the most challenging of the two tasks, and this indecision and alienation is illustrated by the lack of punctuation at the end of the score.

Imaginative Elements

This next piece is the only composition with a material presence online (it appears in Jamie Allen's *Imaginary Sound Works* archive), and it is only included in this analysis due to, as well as in spite of, its complete anonymity. *The text, posted in April, 2019* (which incidentally makes it the only composition from this once-burgeoning imaginary archive to fall within the historical parameters of this study), reads as follows:

Postcoital cacophony

Couples record themselves making love with a hand-held recorder. The unedited files are sent to a discreet collagist, who layers hundreds upon hundreds of these files together in ProTools. The results are broadcast for five minutes on BBC1, just after 'Look North' and before 'The One Show'.

Like most of the other compositions presented in this analysis, *Postcoital Cacophony* is similarly obsessed with mediation, as the couples' love-making is transposed from medium to medium by various technologies, organisations, and individuals, before finally being broadcast in the five-minute slot usually occupied by a regional weather bulletin at 6:55pm, just before programming returns to a homogenised national listing (coincidentally titled *The One Show*). The piece also encapsulates contemporary reflections on the digitisation of pornography and the dissemination of an abundance of amateur erotic material, anonymity and identity, voyeurism and the performative elements of social media, and regional and domestic communities and relationships. As such, it is appropriate that *Postcoital Cacophony's* existence is almost entirely metaphysical.

Private Performance

Gaia Blandina is a sound artist and cellist from Sicily, who has lived in Yorkshire since 2012. She is currently undertaking a PhD at York's Contemporary Music Research Centre, where she creates

interdisciplinary works exploring Deleuzian concepts of difference
and repetition. Her exhibition-installation *Baby Come Home* centres
around ideas of displacement, homeliness, and impermanence, and
consists of more than 60 tents set out across a disused church.
Inside the tents are objects, images, actors, sounds, and insects,
while members of the public are free to duck in and out through
each of the zippered entrances. The piece is a direct response to a
report from Help Refugees UK, which detailed the necessity for
donated tents in Calais - where the police were confiscating or
destroying the temporary housing of refugees during forced site
'evictions'. The exhibition's tents were donated to this cause after
the July 2019 installation closed to the public.

'I was initially interested in investigating spaces, and how we
inhabit them, or how they inhabit us. And the sense of home, of
what is home? How do we inhabit spaces, how spaces reflect on us,
how we become in a space and what does a space become when and how
we inhabit it? What do we put in a space, how do we use it, and can
public spaces be homes? How do we act in a place that is not home,
how do we act in a place that is home? Do we need a home?
Tents was the solution: 48 of them, two person camping tents, in
the stained glass centre, in York, on Micklegate, a beautiful
church with a bell tower. The tents were full or empty, accessible
or not, filled with various objects, various bodies, human bodies,
machine bodies, living and non/living bodies, ipads with Instagram
stories on loop, real living insects in plastic boxes, dying
insects in plastic boxes, dead insects in plastic boxes, fake
rubber insects in plastic boxes, edible gummy insects in plastic
boxes, flashing lights, lights with sensors, walkie-talkies,
security cameras, a knitting station, a poetry station, a collage
station, a smashing plates station, a sleeping human body, an
interactive human body, a bubble wrap bed, something to listen to,
something to talk to, and so on.
But when you enter the church all you can see is tents, and the
first thing that comes to mind is: camps, refugee camps, refugee
crisis.'

Observational Performance

Raja Maya is a composer from Bradford, who moved to Manchester for her studies. Her score
- *Bumble:Be(e)*, takes the form of an A5 sheet of card, which is titled, and
accompanied by blank spaces for texts and drawings. Raja abandons these
scores in communal areas across her university campus, and during the
summer she occasionally sets them on miniature wooden easels next to the
bodies of dead bees. The reverse of these scores contain instructions which

allow participants to send their completed scores (or photos of their completed scores) back to Raja.

'This piece is a reflection on the absence of sound, and a meditation on the interpretations imposed upon symbols; a few of the other composers on my course use emojis in otherwise conventionally-classical scores. `Bumble:Be(e)` also examines mediation - the piece came about last summer, as every day I would walk to the train station and the pavement would be littered with bees, some dying and some already dead. I'd get distressed, and when I spoke about this with my friends, we all mentioned that we'd seen a post circulating on Facebook saying how you could revive some of these bees with a sugar-and-water solution. We all agreed that we had found this advice reassuring, although ultimately none of us had ever gone to the trouble of actually enacting this intervention. As such, this piece is primarily another introspective exercise (*although I've been sent some achingly-detailed portraits of dead bees*).

When I think about the piece, it reminds me of movement, wandering and wondering, and people in transit. It reminds me of the Arianna Grande concert in Manchester, the American artist flying here from the states, the bomber at Victoria station, and my friends who are still having therapy to help move on, or past, or with, or through, the things they saw that night. It reminds me of the days after the event, the resurrection of the Manchester worker-bee as a symbol of hope and resilience, and my housemate who died in a Manchester hotel room on the night of a Tinder date, with a bee tattooed on her shoulder. It reminds me of the dating app Bumble, emblazoned with bees, which spiked in popularity after the Manchester bombings, it reminds me of the buzz of my phone, and it makes me think about death and destruction, communication and guilt. For me, *the piece represents rhizomes, speculative realism, the environment, and a hive of inter-connectivity between places and people and technologies and media and things*. The piece is about be (🐝) ing.'

Postscript

Zidane Larson's name was created by a random-name generator, though coincidentally, this is also the name of a YouTube channel posting football highlights. However, **Gaia Blandina** and **James McIlwrath** are real musicians, and their works referenced here exist (though the commentary to Jim's piece has been fabricated). **Aaron Moorehouse** also exists, and he wrote this essay, though he doesn't believe in some of the justifications he included in his commentary for *Symphony Number None* (which is a real piece he has yet to complete).

Kia Clark is another random-name, though one chosen because it evokes Aaron's memories of a girl he still has feelings for, and although Kia's piece doesn't exist in its entirety, fragments of the work are contained within other pieces by Aaron. Both *Postcoital Cacophony* and Jamie Allen's *Imaginary Soundworks Archive* exist online, and the score remains unedited. Furthermore, *Postcoital Cacophony* is anonymous, and, despite its references to the North of England, the score was not written by Aaron.

Raja Maya's name and piece are both fictional, and although her biography is based on fact, it is an amalgamate of two biographies, one of which is Aaron's.

Aaron is the only artist here who is self-referentially non-performative, and Gaia is the only (identifiable) artist who at the time of writing was over the age of 25, though it is true that all the material pieces included here were written between 2018 and 2019.

Throughout this essay, gradations of grey highlighters are used to hint towards a clause's ficticity, while statements left against a whiter background are more sincere. This element of the text is included as a not-so-subtle hint towards the limitations of canons and categorisations, and an acknowledgement that not everything can be put in black and white.

Finally, it is worth explaining that this piece of writing is the second incarnation of *'Can You Not?'*, the first being a conventionally-canonical exploration into a definition for non-performance. This second version of *'Can You Not?'* was created following discussions with Andy Ingamells, and it exists as a response to Bradford Bailey's criticisms of Jennie Gottschalk's *Experimental Music Since 1970*. Inevitably, this essay also takes heart from Jennifer Walshe's imagined Irish Avant-Garde, the writing of John Cage, and the broader field of ficto-criticism in general.

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